

Week 20
February 1, 2009

One Very Active Ingredient
The Parable of the Yeast
Matthew 13:33

The kingdom of heaven, says Jesus, is like a sower who sows seed. It's also like good seed and bad seed. And the kingdom is like a mustard seed. In the early part of Matthew 13, Jesus uses farming images to communicate the truth about the message of God's kingdom.

Then he shifts images. Now Jesus is in the kitchen. "*The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.*" This simile would have been familiar for people of that day, or for any day in which people have baked their own bread, or even brewed their own wine or beer. Today most of our bread and other foodstuffs are store-bought, so we might not know much about yeast and its effects.

Yeast is a powerful ingredient. First, it's tiny – a micro-organism actually. Much smaller than even the mustard seed, it takes 20,000,000,000 (twenty billion) egg-shaped yeasty beasties to weigh one gram or 1/28 of an ounce. It is a fungus that feeds on sugar and produces fermentation. Some yeast is intentionally cultivated. Other yeast is naturally floating around in the air causing the fermentation of spoiled fruit or vegetables. Whether it happens in naturally ordered or intentionally processed ways, yeast feeds on sugar and transforms it into ethyl alcohol and carbon dioxide. In bread, the alcohol evaporates in the baking process, but the carbon dioxide spreads out into the sticky dough, forming gas bubbles that make the dough rise until it is soft and fluffy. Bread without yeast is heavy and dense. With yeast, bread is light and so very yummy and useful.

Who is the woman in the little yeasty story? She surely represents God or Jesus himself. What or who is the flour? That would be us, and the dough is us under the influence of all the active ingredients of the kingdom message. The yeast, of course, is the kingdom message with all of its truths and implications. When this message is mixed and kneaded into our lives, we are transformed like dough that rises into bread.

What are the yeasty qualities of the gospel?

First, like the yeast itself, it starts out small and simple. The best and most powerful truths and messages about Christ are so simple that a child can understand them. God loves us. Jesus came for us. Jesus died for us. Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus waits for us and cares for us, helping us to live our lives here by loving others until we go to heaven. That's the gospel in a nutshell – rather, *in a yeast cell*. While life is filled with complexities, and while the message of the kingdom raises the specter of a host of sophisticated applications, the gospel starts out simple and small in our lives – a simple and clear message that asks us to either accept it or reject

it. Then it expands out until it affects every area of our lives; the whole lump of dough rises.

Second, like yeast, the kingdom truth is alive! The message of the kingdom is a dynamic, life-breathing truth that rescues and resuscitates anyone who is willing to be truly *kneaded* with its active presence. The word of God is living and active, says scripture. The more I believed the truths of the yeasty message of the kingdom fed on my faith like yeast on sugar until something in me came alive, rising out of a lumpy, doughy awareness toward the fuller and freer experience of being more fully alive.

And yeast is even egg-shaped. Jesus knew that, in my opinion, while no one else had microscopes strong enough to gather this information in his day. He knew, as he knows, that yeast cells are like little tiny eggs of surging life and influence. So is the gospel message. Every part and piece of the gospel of God's kingdom is life waiting to happen.

And the message, like yeast, causes fermentation. Fermentation is a significant shift in the real makeup of dough into bread or juice into wine or hops into beer. In my own life, the message of the kingdom started catalyzing a huge shift and a significant uplift from the moment I allowed for it to actually be true. When I began ordering my life around kingdom truths and kingdom values and kingdom priorities, and even the notion that there is actually a king, life began to really work. Almost everything started to make sense, and even the things that make no sense found some peace and reconciliation in the wider currents and strains of truth and promise. Suffering and loss even found purpose and peaceful resolution under the influence of this fermenting, yeasty message. And God has been raising me up for a long time, now, through various ordeals that felt rotten at times or as hot as an oven at others. But through it all, he's made me more of a man and every day just a bit more like Jesus, the living God-Man. And he wants to do this with each of us and others.

There is yeast-less dough, and it doesn't rise. There are ways of doing religion, even borrowing parts and pieces of the kingdom message, that simply don't rise. There isn't power here. There isn't fermentation that leads to the lightness and functionality of bread. Let me mention a few types of dough that don't rise.

1. Legalism: Like dough without yeast, legalism is dense and heavy. It isn't free and light and airy and functional. To the degree that legalism focuses on guilt and shame and wrong and laws and duties and constraints, religion will never cause people to rise. Even good deeds that are the product of fearful and guilt-ridden compulsion lose power and aren't necessarily the fruit of a whole or well person.

2. Bibliolatry: While much of the kingdom message is communicated beautifully and in inspired ways by the Bible, the displaced worship of the Bible will lead to a life that never quite

rises. Some people worship the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Scriptures, without realizing that the Holy Spirit is so much like the yeast in a lump of dough. People who have a closed view about the effects of the Spirit and choose to believe that he only finds expression through the written word, will have a stunted experience of faith, much like a lump of dough that never quite rises to its potential.

3. Behavioralism: Much like legalism, I'm referring here to religion that emphasizes "what we must do for God" instead of "what is true about God" and "what God has already done through Christ." While any living faith will affect our behavior, Christianity is not, at its best, a story of great human behavior or endeavor. It is the story of what God does through Jesus his Son to engage us and rescue us. When our faith is in us, and when it rests on our capacity to either live it well or not, it will fall flat simply because we so often fall flat.

4. Philosophical/ethical Christianity: On the other end of the spectrum, if our faith is only about ideas, philosophies and ethical argument, it will all lay there like lumps of yeastless dough. Just as Christianity isn't only or ultimately about our behavior, it isn't just a way of thinking. Yes, the message of the kingdom is loaded with philosophical truth and ethical concerns, but it is first and foremost a declaration of truth and identity. Who is God and how has God been revealed? Is this Jesus actually Son of God, the character of God embodied in and revealed to humankind, and is Jesus actually the Lord of heaven and earth? If he is, then the truths emanating out of that actuality make us all come to life, like yeast in dough.

5. Churchianity: Now I'm talking in simpler terms about something that all of us have either seen in ourselves or others (though judging them is not good for us). Churchianity means believing that being in church makes me Christian as if being at McDonalds make me a hamburger. I'm talking about club Christianity where we belong and enjoy some of the benefits, but quietly we hope that no one really asks us to take the oath or to know the secret handshake. We go to church, yes, and we go to movies, and we go to softball practice and karate, and we belong to the PTA and it's all good, right? This will always be a flat experience.

6. Compartmentalization: Like Churchianity, compartmentalization looks at the Christian component of life like one more good thing among many. I exercise and I pray. I go to church and I go to school. I think about Jesus and I think about fashion or sports or business. The key here is to learn how to separate everything out so that one doesn't dominate or impinge on the space of the other. Sort of like those who say, "Everything in moderation." Jesus, of course, didn't say that. He didn't ask anyone to be moderate about the notion of the kingdom and its corresponding messages. And our compartmentalization leads to a lack of integration – which means a lack of integrity. It can actually lead to disintegration and hypocrisy of every kind. Like a lump of dough that wasn't kneaded properly; it never quite rises, and it can lead to some pretty

funny looking creations.

7. One-among-many-ism: Again, this is like compartmentalization, but it is the belief that Jesus and the kingdom message is really pretty good, and should be respected right alongside the message I got out of my most recent fortune cookie. Honestly, truth is revealed by God through nature and into the hearts and minds of people all over the world and all through the ages. But only Jesus is the Son of God, living God-Man, and the savior of the world. The others (at least the sane ones) didn't even claim to be, and most never even asked to be viewed as objects of reverence on a par with the likes of Jesus. There is no one with the likes of Jesus, though I hope to be more like him every day. Our fuzzy, cultural faith is the faith of one-among-many-ism. We can respect truth wherever it comes from, but if we think that Jesus is only one among many, we believe something that Jesus never said or believed about himself. That faith will not make you rise.

8. A self-help program: Like the dough previously mentioned, if we approach Jesus and the Christian system as one more self-help program, right after Pilates and right before Weight-Watchers, we're really headed for disappointment. Yes, I believe in Christ partly out of my own profound sense of need, and yes, Jesus does help me immensely. But faith, initially and finally, is about believing in this person and the message about his kingdom. Of course, in believing, Jesus blesses us with a program, or a system of being and doing and thinking, that will better us. But part of the program is to be a more than a bit less self-occupied and to focus on God and love others. That is where the yeasty lift comes from.

There might be other flat dough worth mentioning. But this should remind us and encourage us not to settle for anything less than the real, life-changing, dough-lifting form of faith.

The real deal, the yeasty faith, surrounds:

1. The Person: The person of God revealed through Jesus Christ and living in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. God is real, and God is knowable. God is even sociable. He knows you and wants you to know him. This faith of ours is a living, dynamic relationship with a person, who expresses himself and the fullness of his character and personality through Father, Son and Spirit.

2. The Presence: God is always with us. Jesus said, *"I will not leave you like orphans."* He also said, *"I'm with you to the end of the age."* The Holy Spirit lives in us by faith. God watches over us all the time. And Jesus is our steady and sure advocate before God, since he knows well the limitations and tragedies and temptations of life in human form. You are never alone. He is always with you. He is even IN you.

3. The power: This life-giving force that we call God makes available to us the power to live

well and boldly. He even gives us gifts and the supernatural power to be extraordinary vessels of his good purposes according to those areas of gifting. When all of us are working and living in accord, the church becomes like the body of Jesus, fully functioning to seek and to save the lost and to help a hurting world.

4. The pursuit: We keep seeking him and pursuing him and building relationship with God. Like any relationship, the day we stop trying and investing and giving is the day the life seeps out of it. When we lose our curiosity and teachability and our susceptibility to real change and growth, then the bread goes dry and the dough won't rise.

5. The proof: Real religion shows itself as real mostly because it has a reproductive or viral or fermenting effect as we spread the organic nature of it. These are products of a life lived in close proximity to God:

- a. The fruits of the Spirit are proofs, like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.
- b. A lifestyle of advocacy for the weak, the poor, the powerless is proof of the influence of God in our lives. Real religion cares for orphans and widows. While all of these good things can be done without Christ, a life lived close to Jesus will always drift toward real service to those in need.
- c. The good fruit of faith in the lives of those near to us. While people will forever have freedom to choose in or out of relationship with God, people with a yeasty faith will usually affect those around them for the better.
- d. Hope. Less fear, more faith in the future. We grieve, but not the way the world does. We believe.

All this to say, let the yeast of the kingdom message be kneaded into the whole lump of your life. Sometimes, the kneading can be painful the events and disciplines that challenge our faith and actually spread its influence. But, please, enjoy its influence and believe that it's real and life-giving. Don't settle for being a lump of dough, but let Jesus bring his fermenting influence into your life. Jesus is the bread of life, born in Bethlehem, the House of Bread. He is the Risen Lord and he wants you to be fully alive and risen to be an agent of his life-giving message.